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Non-Flying Jobs In General Aviation

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General aviation – defined as all aviation not classified as military or airline – is by far the largest segment of the aviation industry. In terms of aircraft, there are about 221,000 general aviation aircraft compared to just under 19,000 airliners of all types in the United States. The airlines serve just 650 airports in the U.S., while general aviation serves over 5,300 airports in addition to those airports offering airline service.

Often overlooked as a source of employment, general aviation offers some of the most stimulating, challenging and rewarding jobs in the aviation community. Here is just a sample:

Fixed Base Operators

FBO's, as they are called, are the one-stop-shop for the general aviation community. They are to GA what airport terminals are to airlines, offering parking, fuel, maintenance, passenger boarding and deplaning, auto parking, car rental, food and a host of additional services.

Most visible are the customer support people. They take fuel orders from pilots, arrange for maintenance and aircraft parking, receive payments for services and perform many courtesies such as making hotel and car reservations. Being a customer service representative is also a great networking opportunity for aspiring pilots, since CSRs talk with working pilots all day.

Nearly as visible are the line crew people. Line crews greet airplanes as they come in and guide them to parking. They also help aircraft depart the FBO's parking ramp, all part of marshaling, or moving an aircraft on the ground safely.

Line crews fuel aircraft, a very important task with many safety ramifications. Improper fueling, say with jet fuel when the aircraft requires gasoline instead, can cause a serious accident. Moreover, fuelers must not damage the aircraft even in the slightest way while fuel is being added. Line crewmen work with customer service representatives to make sure proper services are rendered.

Some higher-end FBOs have the equivalent of a hotel concierge, called an owner representative. These specialized customer service people make sure that corporate jet passengers have a smooth, seamless experience at the airport including boarding, departure and return. They make sure the aircraft is clean, fully stocked with food and in perfect order. They arrange for ground transportation, baggage transfer and handle any support service requirements that may arise.

Larger FBOs are often part of a chain, and as such employees receive benefits such as 401K

plans, health and dental insurance, paid vacation and sometimes an annual bonus.

Aircraft Management

Managing an airplane can be a logistically Herculean task, one which many aircraft owners prefer to delegate to professionals. Aircraft require frequent maintenance, periodic inspections, compliance with FAA airworthiness directives and manufacturers' service bulletins, proper insurance, current registration and much more. Professional aircraft managers assure that the aircraft is legal and safe, and also often handle pilot recruitment, qualification and recurrent training.

Positions in this niche market require a high attention to detail, a commitment to safety, and tolerance for the enormous amount of paperwork it takes to keep an airplane flying.

Aircraft Sales and Brokerages

The buying and selling of aircraft is an art form unto itself. If you have a persuasive and persistent personality, then this might be just right for you. As in most sales positions, the pay can be high and is usually based on a commission. You must know a great deal about airplanes in general, or you may specialize in one make or even one model.

If you wish to demonstrate an airplane to a prospective owner, you must be a pilot with over 200 hours. However, in the case of higher-end airplanes and especially jets, the owner may often not be a pilot and will hire or have an aircraft management firm hire a crew.

At this altitude, aircraft sales are made or lost on the basis of numbers - fuel efficiency, depreciation, tax credits and all the "financials" that form a total package to the prospective buyer. In the end, a multimillion-dollar purchase is more dependent on numbers than anything else. If you are persuasive, analytical and good at working the numbers, then you might enjoy a job as an aircraft broker.

Sales, Sales, Sales

It is held that until somebody sells something, nothing happens. An aircraft charter doesn't happen until someone sells one. Aviation people need lots of products and services, such as charts, headsets, electronics packages, maintenance overhauls and so much more. It all finds its way to market through sales people, whether through an FBO, a pilot shop or through an avionics dealer or maintenance facility.

Aircraft insurance brokers sell pilots and aircraft owners essential liability and hull (meaning the aircraft itself) insurance without which an airplane can fly, but at huge and unacceptable risk to the owner. Brokers are in the business of protecting their clients from financial disaster in case of a crash or physical damage to the aircraft, just as we buy car insurance.

Aircraft appraisers are an essential part of both the selling and insurance process, as when there is a loss due to aircraft damage, perhaps in a hurricane. Professional appraisers do their best to fairly establish the value of an aircraft based in part on its age, maintenance status, reputation, equipment on board and more. Reputable appraisers can earn six-figure incomes.

When All is Said and Done

At the end of the day, is aviation is just another segment of our large and diverse economy? No, not for those who love it. Whether for its dynamic nature, or because it's a little unique, or for some other inexpressible reason, many who work in aviation accept smaller financial rewards because they love going to work every day. As someone wise once said, "If you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life."

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